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The labour of dis-identification: using the image of production to understand identity and resistance

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The Labour of Dis-identification: Using the Image of Production to Understand Identity and Resistance

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Abstract

Research exploring corporate culture management has identified cynicism as a significant way some workers resist attempts to control their identities. The metaphors of defence and distancing are popular ways of explaining this cynicism. The paper argues that these metaphors posit an 'already present' self as the object of protection. Drawing on empirical research of a communications firm, it is suggested cynicism might also be understood as the ongoing *production* of subjectivity rather than its defence or distancing from cultural controls. The study demonstrates how the labour of dis-identification involved a constant renewal of self opposed to dominant managerial discourses. But such a renewal is bound to biographical time and space through repetition. We repeat what we are as we become a self 'against' managerial discourses. In this sense, the present is never completely new but always a (partial) repetition of what has come before.

Introduction

Much research has been conducted over the last 20 years exploring the growing use of management practices that target the subjectivities of employees. With the advent of corporate culture management, teamwork and the unobtrusive application of electronic monitoring, critical scholarship has heralded the 'last frontier of control' (Ray, 1986) in which the very identities of organizational members are harnessed to the labour process (Thompkins and Cheney, 1985; Barker, 1993; Kunda, 1992). While this type of control is not entirely novel (see Barley and Kunda, 1992; Parker 2000), the current drive to culturally cleanse the subjectivities of workers' does represent a significant political development (Strangleman and Roberts, 1999; Willmott, 1993). When workers are transformed into 'designer selves' (Casey, 1995, 1996) or 'enterprising selves' (du Gay, 1996) and ritually collude in their own exploitation, the space for recalcitrance is markedly reduced (Barker, 1999).

Although we have learnt a great deal about employee experiences of culture management and other normative controls from these studies, they have been criticized for presenting an over-totalizing view of managerial power (Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995). As a result, recent research has turned to the question of resistance in the context of contemporary work forms (Parker, 2002). One reason resistance was missed in the past was because it was conceptualized only in traditional terms, viz. open, overt and organized acts of rebellion (Fleming and Sewell, 2002). The absence of open conflict was equated with the demise of resistance. Now given the prominence of identity-based controls in many post-industrial workplaces, scholarship has become

increasingly interested in the quotidian and often subjective ways workers resist managerial domination (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Collinson, 1994; Edwards, et al. 1995; Trethewey, 1997).

The focus on less overt forms of dissent has its advantages. One no longer has to identify acts that conform to the Fordist formula of class antagonism, which is not to say class is no longer relevant or important (Fleming, 2002). Although the micro-struggles of everyday life have been recognized via the traditional framework of class interests and conflict (see Roy 1952, 1958; Burawoy, 1979), recent analyses have been drawn to more post-structuralist themes such as identity, selfhood and ethics (Knights and Vurdubakis, 1994; Clegg, 1994). Here, subjective resistance is not viewed as an effect of structural antagonism or primary class interests (cf. Edwards, 1979) but as a contingent set of tactics that have varying degrees of success in challenging identity-based controls (Ezzamel et al, 2001; Gabriel, 1999). Humour, irony, sexuality and consumer strategies have all been studied from this perspective. But this emphasis has its disadvantages. Key among them has been a failure to analytically connect these everyday tactics to broader flows of domination (i.e., global capitalism, class, nation, etc.), a problem that will be revisited later.

This paper concentrates on *cynicism* as an employee response to culture management, which too has been increasingly theorized as resistance.[1] Many of the studies rebuked for their over-totalizing portrayals of managerial control do acknowledge employee cynicism as a significant, if somewhat marginal

response (e.g., Kunda, 1992; Casey, 1995; Willmott, 1993; du Gay and Salaman, 1992). Some workers could 'see through' the culture program and sardonically ridiculed the values and norms proffered by management (also see Collinson, 1988, 1992). More often than not, however, cynicism was treated as a harmless 'safety valve' rather than a meaningful challenge to power. Others have argued that while cynicism may not exactly overthrow capitalism, it can provide some subversive efficacy in relation to some forms of cultural domination (Sturdy and Fineman, 2001; Fleming and Spicer, 2003; Hodgson, 2005).

Almost universal in all these accounts of employee cynicism (as resistance or otherwise) is the implicit evocation of two closely related metaphors: cynicism as the *defence* of selfhood and *distancing* of selfhood. These metaphors are useful for helping us appreciate the dynamics underlying cynicism (as well as irony, humour, scepticism, etc.). But they do have one limitation. The self being protected by cynicism is treated as an already existing space, rather than something that partially emerges as subjects resist. Drawing on empirical research of a call-centre, this article suggests that cynicism might also entail the ongoing *production* of subjective space rather than just its defence or distancing. It is argued that the metaphor of production may allow us to identify the more precarious and 'achieved' elements of selfhood in antagonistic social conditions.

In order to develop this argument, the paper is organized as follows. First I explore the widespread usage of the twin metaphors of defence and

distancing, surfacing some of the problematic assumptions underlying them. The paper then draws on research of a call-centre to demonstrate how cynicism might also be understood as the production of selfhood rather than its protection. In doing this the paper hopes to demonstrate how crucial metaphors are for shaping our conceptualizations of political processes in organizations. Finally, the development of an alternative metaphor aims to provide a more complex understanding of the ways in which subjectivity, power and resistance intersect in contemporary firms.

Images of Cynicism

The use of metaphor in scholarship is an important dimension of theory development and empirical analysis that enables researchers to visualize organizational processes from multiple perspectives (Morgan, 1980, 1986; Morgan and Smircich, 1980; Chia and King, 2002). The term *resistance*, for example, is a metaphor derived from the natural sciences, and in particular Newtonian physics ('every primary action has an equal and opposite reaction') (Burrell, 1984). This image helps us picture the politics of work by accentuating friction, opposition and negation. Even the term 'cynic' is a metaphor for a 'dogs life', derived from the ancient Greek word *Kuvlkos* (meaning Dog) (Sloterdijk, 1988).

While metaphors shed light on phenomena, they can also establish a taken for granted quality that limits analytical scope (Burrell, 1996; Palmer and Dunford, 1996). For example, the image of *resistance* mentioned above simplistically envisages power and resistance as mutually opposing forces,

which does not sit well with Foucauldian arguments regarding their interpenetration (Burrell, 1984; Fleming and Sewell, 2002). Similarly, the metaphors of defence and distancing involve certain assumptions about the nature of self and power. While these metaphors remain very useful, they do have limitations. Let's examine the metaphors in more detail.

Cynicism as Defence of Self

Cynicism has been interpreted as a way some employees defend their private selves from being co-opted by identity-based controls and thus partially avoid subjective 'colonization' (Casey, 1995). As a "defence mechanism" (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993: 105), cynicism will usually involve an internal monologue that sardonically debunks management initiatives while externally complying with them (Anderson, 1996). This disunity shields genuine thoughts and feelings so that subjective colonization is kept to a minimum (Sturdy, 1998; Sturdy and Fineman, 2001). While the concept of defence has obvious Freudian connotations (Freud, 1967), it is treated here in a more social psychological manner whereby an inner preserve is insulated from a painful environment.

The metaphor of defence portrays power as an invading force and subjectivity as an embattled fortress. The words 'boundary patrolling' and 'guarding', for example, are used by Casey (1995) to describe how cynicism helps workers avoid the 'psychological siege and assault' of cultural controls. In her study of an electronics corporation, Casey observed how a number of employees

complied with the edicts of the culture program but privately rejected it as a sham:

> The cynicism acts as a defence against the possibility that capitulation might collapse into collusion – the position of self sought by the company. Ironic cynicism protects against both commitment to the company… (Casey, 1995: 175).

The reasons for defending the self via cynicism are thought to be varied. It could be a way of maintaining a sense of dignity and integrity when other avenues are limited (Hodson, 2001). As the culture becomes too claustrophobic or unbelievable, cynicism may be used to "defend people's sense of self against a tyrannical manager" and thus maintain a degree of psychic security (Watson, 1994: 194) Or, it could simply be a pragmatic way of getting by without the emotional drain of identification, as Ackroyd and Thompson (1999) suggest in relation to cynical humour. Moreover, if uncertainty and constant change characterize organizational life cynicism could help maintain a secure inner self while everything else is in a state of flux (Sennet, 1998). Anthony (1994) and Hochschild (1983) argue that organizational members may attempt to protect their authentic values when the schism between lived experience and rhetoric is too stark. Such defensive cynicism could be experienced as an internal numbness that provides employees with a zone of freedom whilst they go through the motions, as Van Maanen (1991) observed among Disneyland employees: "much numbness is, of course, beyond the knowledge of superiors and guests because most employees have little trouble appearing as if they are present even when they

are not. It suggests that there is still a sacred preserve of individuality left among employees in the park" (Van Maanen, 1991: 75).

Cynicism as Distancing of Self

A closely related metaphor evoked to explain cynicism is distancing. Some suggest cynicism enables workers to distance their internal experiences of self from external cultural controls. This inside-outside spatial image can be traced back to the influential work of Goffman (1959), who theorized the self in dramaturgical terms, as having a front stage and a back stage. According to Goffman, people neurotically alternate between 'role embracement' and 'role distancing', with cynicism falling in the latter category. The metaphor of distance involves much more movement than defence - instead of picturing a barricaded self, we imagine a kind of tactical detachment, aloofness and normative isolation. As Lasch (1979) puts it, "the worker seeks to escape from … inauthenticity by creating an ironic distance from his (sic) daily routine… He takes refuge in jokes, mockery and cynicism" (Lasch, 1979: 95).

Drawing on this metaphor, Sturdy (1998) states that when confronted with a managed customer service culture some employees "distance all but outward appearances, their thoughts and feelings, in an attempt to maintain a separate or 'real' self and control" (Sturdy, 1998: 32). This 'resistance through distance' (Collinson, 1994) can circumscribe a normative space of relative autonomy (also see Leidner 1993). Kunda's (1992) study of 'Tech' provides an excellent example of this process. Echoing Goffman (1959), he understands cynicism as 'cognitive distancing':

> Cognitive distancing – disputing popular ideological formulations – is manifested when one suggests that one is "wise" to what is "really" going on. … One frequently encountered mode of cognitive distancing is cynicism. This is usually expressed as a debunking assertion, cast as a personal insight, that reality is very different from ideological claims (Kunda, 1992: 178).

In his analysis of Kunda, Willmott (1993) extends the idea of distancing by evoking Berger and Luckmann's (1966) notion of 'cool alternation'. This is where individuals "contrive to distance themselves from the roles they play" (Willmott 1993: 536). According to Gabriel (1999), this strategy is especially evident in organizations that rely on an overly mawkish discourse of family and togetherness. Cynicism is viewed as "a form of psychological distancing in which the individual constructs his/her ideal, out of his/her ability to distance him/herself from the organization…" (Gabriel, 1999: 191).

Assessing the Metaphors

The defence and distancing metaphors are useful for explaining the subjective mechanics of employee cynicism in nominally high-commitment organizations. Upon closer inspection, however, both involve assumptions that may also limit our analysis of the complex ways self, power and resistance intersect.

The 'a priori' subject

Both the defence and distancing explanations of cynicism either implicitly or explicitly posit a genuine self that is presumed to be 'already there' before the appearance of power or conflict. Cynicism is a way of fending off controls before they impinge upon this pre-established terrain. Here the idea of

authenticity is sometimes raised, as is done by Hochschild (1983).[2] Others like Casey, Kunda and Van Maanen are more sophisticated, viewing the protected subject as a social construct: when we enter organizations we have identities formed by our broader lives, our past as well as by our work relations. But even here a fixed and finalized personhood is thought to sit behind the faux-displays of identification.

Why is this *a priori* subject problematic? A tradition of social theory emerging from Heidegger (1927/1953) highlights the ways in which selfhood must be constantly remade and relived. It does not ossify into a base, as it requires perpetual work. Heidegger (1927/1953) argued that identity is fundamentally temporal and involves a kind of *becoming*. It must be perpetually invented in the present from strands of the past and projected into the future. Selfhood or *Da-sein* is thus "not a finished fact" but always "plunges out of itself into itself" (Heidegger, 1927/1953: 167). Foucault (1977) added to this assertion by demonstrating how self is discontinuous and technical, intimately associated with disciplinary coercions that are fractured both in time and space. The defence and distancing metaphors strain to accommodate this reinvented aspect of self because cynicism is thought to protect identity rather than form it.

Since the defence and distancing metaphors imply an *a priori* self, there is a tendency to separate 'who one really is' behind the cynicism from the power being resisted. Here the ego is analogous to a fortress or 'stadium' (Lacan, 1977) that is shielded from the outside world of domination. Kondo (1990)

questioned this conceptual separation in her study of female workers in a Japanese confectionary factory. She argued that employees resisted the hyper-feminized cultural roles through cynical incredulity, but did so by *reusing* the very discourse they were undermining. They determined 'who they really were' not by blocking power but by absorbing it in order to make an identity more acceptable to them (e.g., the powerful skilfulness of femininity). This approach, of course, resonates with Foucault's (1980) argument that resistance is always contaminated by the power it resists:

> Resistance to power does not have to come from somewhere else to be real, nor is it inexorably frustrated through being the compatriot of power (Foucault, 1980: 142, also see Foucault, 1963/1997).

This point has been elegantly unpacked by De Certeau (1984). He explains everyday resistance as a *tactical* process of making do with the materials at hand (or *bricolage*, meaning handiwork in French). Resistance from this perspective "insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance" (de Certeau 1984: xix). For all its advantages, the defence and distancing metaphors may miss this insight because the *a priori* self that cynicism protects is seen to confront power as a finished project rather than emerge from the cynicism itself.

The paradox of distance

A common example of this 'making do' is when workers cynically rescript the official culture in order to render it absurd or hypocritical (Kondo, 1990; McKinlay and Taylor, 1996). Parker (2002) has demonstrated how sponsored

terms like autonomy, self-management and trust are often turned back on the organization as an instrument of critique: 'We are not *really* allowed to manage our selves. We are not *really* trusted.' From this point of view, the notion of distance misses something. Rather than moving away from a powerful discourse, cynical resistance might actually become contiguous with it. Take the practice of parody. Cynicism often involves a mimetic element in which employees jokingly 'send up' those in authority. Here, the geography of resistance is one of intimacy rather than distance, as Butler (1998: 34) explains in reference to cynical parody: "parody requires a certain ability to identify, approximate, and draw near; it engages an intimacy with the position it appropriates that troubles the voice, the bearing, the performitivity of the subject…." In parody, one momentarily assumes the role of authority, becomes familiar with it and perhaps understands it better than those who sincerely identify with it (also see Žižek, 2000).

A similar idea has been explored in relation to the seditious practice of *over-identification*; a tactic in which workers resist the discourse of culture management by taking it too seriously and over-identifying with certain norms and beliefs (Fleming and Sewell 2002). A favourite lampooning strategy among unions, for example, is to follow a cultural script to the letter, swiftly short-circuiting its administrative legitimacy (Fleming and Spicer, 2002). As Deleuze (1994) claims, "by adopting the law, a falsely submissive soul manages to evade it and taste the pleasures it was supposed to forbid. We can see this in demonstration by absurdity and working to rule…" (Deleuze, 1994: 5). A kind of cultural working to rule (fixing hundreds of company

stickers to your car, or swamping the suggestion box with not entirely useless offerings) may have similar subversive effects.

Cynicism as Production

The defence and distancing metaphors are useful ways of explaining cynicism in the context of identity-base controls, but entail the above blind spots. Some of these might be sidestepped if we think of cynicism as the production or constitution of selfhood rather than merely its defence or distancing. The metaphor of production avoids recourse to an *a priori* self and does not sever those who resist from powerful discourses. This is because cynicism is seen to partially determine who one is rather than just protect it.

The image of production does have significant emancipatory connotations in Marxist social theory. Hardt and Negri (1994), for example, claim, "subjectivity must be grasped in terms of the social processes that animate the production of subjectivity. The subject is at the same time a product and productive, constituted in and constitutive of the vast networks of social labour" (Hardt and Negri, 1994: 12). In other words, resistance is analogous to a productive act because it crafts emancipatory space within relations of domination. This space (in our case the irrepressible 'who I really am') is not pre-given; it must be made in order to be occupied and enjoyed (also see Lefebrve, 1973).

The remainder of the paper outlines a brief illustrative example of how we might apply the metaphor of production to understand cynicism as resistance (also see Sturdy and Fleming, 2003; Fleming and Spicer, 2004, Fleming,

forthcoming). An 8-month study was conducted at *Sunray Customer Service* (a pseudonym), an American owned call-centre with around 1000 employees based in an Australian city. Sunray deals with communication functions outsourced by banks, airlines, insurance firms, telephone companies, etc. and places much emphasis on the customer service skills of employees. The company was founded by James Carr (another pseudonym) in the early 1990s and he remains the CEO and cultural figurehead. The initial objective of the research project was to gain an in-depth understanding of how Sunray shapes the culture and the different ways employees respond to these initiatives. A sample of three Human Resource Managers and 30 employees was selected and interviewed at various intervals over the eight months.

I want to narrow the focus to data collected from a non-probability sample of four employees that were repeatedly interviewed over a six-month period. Obviously this sample is not representative in a strict quantitative sense because it does not take into consideration those respondents who were positive or simply indifferent. No generalized claims regarding the organization as a whole are inferred from this data. But such a sample does have the advantage of providing an in-depth thick description of the cynicism that was present (Van Maanen, 1998). The cohort consisted of two males (aged 25 and 27) and two females (22 and 26) who lived together. Although they were interviewed individually inside the organization, some of the richest data was collected from semi-structured focus groups conducted outside of working hours in an informal and conversational manner. Their views will be discussed below.

Culture Management at Sunray

The culture management program at Sunray focuses on the nature of call-centre work and is primarily directed at telephone agents. It is openly accepted by the organization that this type of employment can be very mundane and alienating. The culture therefore aims to support employees by creating a fun and playful environment. Janis, a human resource manager, explains: “work in a call-centre can be extremely mundane and monotonous, so we have to make it a rewarding experience in order to be successful”. And, again, call-centre work “could be one of the most repetitively boring jobs you could ever do if you choose to view it that way, but we don’t”. Perhaps the most ubiquitous manifestation of Sunray’s ‘culture of fun’ is the slogan, “Remember the 3Fs: Focus, Fun, Fulfilment.” This phrase encourages employees to perceive call-centre work as exciting, exhilarating and a source of fulfilment. Genuine commitment to these values is considered an important requisite for being part of the Sunray team.

An important aspect of the culture is a discourse of paternalism (Kerfoot and Knights, 1993) in which sentiments of care, protection and nurture are prevalent. This paternalism does not necessarily fit the ideal-type of providing job security, housing, education outside of work, insurance, crèches, etc. It is more about discursively casting employees as dependent children and the organization as benign caregiver. It is strongly symbolic in this sense. This paternalism manifests in the Sunray culture program in five ways.

1. *The benevolent patriarch*: A prominent discourse of family and kin positions James Carr (and Sunray management more generally) as a benevolent father figure who will give workers participatory discretion and look after them when they cannot do it themselves. During the training sessions, for instance, workers are informed that James Carr (via the management) has their best interests at heart and will guide them with a magnanimous, yet firm hand. James Carr takes it upon himself to know people by their first name and greets them whenever he 'does the rounds' in the call-rooms in order to foster patronage. His eccentric activities (dressing up as Santa Claus) also inspire a friendly and giving parental image within the firm.

2. *Family*: A Human Resource Manager said that Sunray is like a "happy family" insofar as it tries to discard formality by promoting a trusting and kindred atmosphere (also see Gabriel, 1999). This is especially evident in the team orientation of the labour process, which is highly celebrated in the official culture. These groups consist of around nine employees and aim to create very personal relationships among peers as well as between employees and supervisors.

3. *Recruitment and training*: A good deal of the people employed at Sunray are between the ages of 18 and 25, making the average age of Sunray workers around 23 and tacitly perpetuating the parent-child feel of the culture. This average is not accidental but the result of a premeditated hiring strategy. Part of the right attitude at Sunray is considered to be the cool, youthful and flexible ethos that younger people are presumed to possess. According to a

manager, “young people find our culture very, very attractive because they can just be themselves”. Managers, however, were generally older, which created a definite parental or older sibling age-gap. Activities in the training sessions also conveyed this motif. For example, in one induction session, workers stood and sung the Muppet’s *The Rainbow Connection* in order to emphasize the idea that it is acceptable to be different and zany.

4. *Blurring work and non-work boundaries*: Sunray fits Coser’s (1974) description of a ‘greedy institution’ in the way it attempts to influence the non-work lives of employees. This too has strong paternalistic undertones. For example, workers are asked to take home a training pamphlet with a ‘fill-in-the-blanks’ word puzzle that reads “what are the 3Fs?” to complete in their own time. Moreover, team leaders have a strong counselling role whereby each week they discuss personal problems, behaviours and general habits that may be concerning them. This is also a time of confession for those who are having trouble adapting to the culture or are experiencing problems at home.

5. *Kindergarten atmosphere*: Sunray aims to create a cultural and physical environment that is visibly fun, ebullient and childlike in order to inspire workers. For example, teams have ‘dress-up’ days where they come dressed as their favourite superhero or cartoon figure. Special Away Days are held annually and consist of stage productions, which a manager refers to as “kind of school musical.” This cultural logic is also reflected in the physical space of the organization. The walls are painted yellow and red, the supporting pillars

are purple, and the carpets are a vivid blue. In one area, multi-colour building blocks spell out the name of a mobile phone company alongside figures of Big Bird and Grover. Given the juvenile ambience this creates, one employee said Sunray resembled a “playschool” or “kindergarten”.

In summary, this paternalistic dimension of the culture program aims to construct the identities of workers’ in terms analogous to children in a school or family setting. The meaning of childhood in this cultural discourse is fixed in a very specific way. The child/employee is assumed to be weak, psychologically and morally ambiguous, unable to look after themselves and motivated by the anticipation of pleasure or punishment.

Cynicism as the Production of Subjectivity

While some employees interviewed positively identified with this discourse of paternalism and enjoyed the psychic security it afforded them, others were not so enthusiastic. Noteworthy were the cynical attitudes among a cohort of four employees mentioned above. Mark (25), Michael (27), Beth (26) and Jane (22) (pseudonyms) were close friends outside of work. These workers generally disliked the childlike roles and had little respect for management as an all-knowing parental figure. Jane, who answers calls for an insurance company, explains why:

> Working at Sunray is like working for ‘Playschool’ [*a children’s television programme*]. It’s so much like an American kindergarten – not just any kindergarten but an American one – a plastic, fake kindergarten. The murals on the wall, the telling off if I’m late and the patronising tone in which I’m spoken to all give it a very childish flavour.

One reason the cohort were cynical about this aspect of the culture was because it compromised their identities as dignified and rational adults. The paternalism in its most patronizing form aims to strip away this sense of self and instigate a weak, dependent and sometimes ignorant identity. On one occasion, I was interviewing the group and Michael presented a handbook that included the fill-in-the-blanks exercise referred to earlier. Here are some of the exchanges that ensued:

> *Jane:* Yeah, you get a handbook and it says [*In a childish tone*] "What are the 3Fs?" and you think [*In the same sarcastic tone*] "Oh, gee, would they be the 3Fs I saw on the other page?" It's very much an adult/child relationship they are trying to instigate here.
> *Mark:* [*In a sarcastically immature voice*] I keep mine with me on my desk all the time. I might just forget the 3Fs so I can never be without it.
> *Jane:* [*In a fatherly voice*] What about your recognition certificate, son – have you got that?
> *Mark:* Of course!
> *Jane:* [*Back to her own voice*] I don't. I lost mine [*Laughs*].

The task of filling-in-the-blanks was found patronizing by the group and they could cynically penetrate what they openly recognized as "social conditioning." Beth, an agent for an airline company, says sometimes she would love to say to her team leader [*speaking to me as if I was a superior*] "I'm not a child and I won't be spoken to as one!". The group had even redefined the "3Fs" slogan into their own bawdy statement so that it more accurately captures (in their eyes) the *real* character desired by Sunray.

The paradoxically relaxed yet consumer-driven dress code is another target of cynicism. The social pressure experience by the cohort in relation to the designer cool at Sunray is not primarily economic (i.e., purchasing the latest

fashions). For them, it is the school-like peer evaluation that makes them anxious, which connects with the issue of paternalism. This is what Beth said:

> When I go to meet Mark I wait a block down the road because if I wait outside I get looked at by the Sunray people to see what I'm wearing. I hate it; it's like being back at high school. They all must wear stylish clothes to [*sarcastically and impersonating a subscriber*] 'fit in.'

This cynical reception of Sunray paternalism can be interpreted as a modality of resistance in the context of identity-based controls. These employees used a cynical disposition to forge a sense of self that contradicted the discourse of paternalism. It emphasized their adulthood, maturity and forthrightness, attributes that are strong in both Australian culture generally (being 'down to earth') and working-class culture specifically ('cutting the bullshit') (also see Selsky et al., 2003). The cynicism crafted an identity that was more acceptable to employees and thus afforded them an element of dignity in a rather condescending environment. Further more, the very act of penetrating the discourse of paternalism vindicated their intellectual and moral strength.

This cynicism could be interpreted as the *defence* or *distancing* of dignified mature/adult selves. But these metaphors miss the contingent, discontinuous and creative aspects of this identity-based resistance. Evidence from Sunray suggests that the cynics created a counter-identity of adulthood, maturity and dignity by actually *using* the discourse of paternalism in an imaginative and *ad hoc* manner. It is this pragmatic familiarity with power that is key because it means informants did not bar paternalism from the domain of self but intimately engaged with it in order to produce something different. For

example, when interviewees re-worded the 3Fs into a vulgar parody of the company or cynically lampooned the Away Day function they were at the same time politically defining themselves. This assertion of a mature and dignified demeanour was co-extensive with power rather than prior to it.

Cynicism, context and repetition

It is important to note that these radical identities were not invented anew out of 'thin air'. The construction process was bound by context and societal discourses relating to class, capitalism and patriarchy. While the subject position of dignified adults may have already been present among Sunray employees as *possibility*, it was not until they engaged with the paternalism that it became a co-ordinate of struggle. Only when they confronted paternalistic domination did they require this type of self-understanding, as it appeared to emerge with the power relationship that was being resisted. The metaphor of production is appropriate here because it reveals how these resistant identities are realized *when* and *where* power is applied. The idea of production therefore demonstrates how 'who I really am' is not a universal support for resistance but a dialectical outcome of antagonism itself.

While the cynicism did represent an ongoing performativity and production of self, it was not completely different each time the resistance was articulated. That is to say, although the creation process was a constant achievement, there was continuity and stability of sorts rather than radical difference at each moment. The production process appeared to involve a degree of consistency over time and space in which certain motifs reappeared and served as

supports. This was evidenced through either the reiteration of a past event (memory of waiting for a friend outside the Sunray building) or as the reiteration of certain themes in the discourse of cynicism (the notions of dignity and maturity were often repeated). This tells us that the production of a counter-identity through the cynical moment consists of a certain *repetition* whereby subjects return to the past in order to make the future. The compulsion to repeat has been explored by a number of important social theorists in relation to subjectivity, self and the social (see Freud, 1920/1961; Deleuze, 1994). An analysis of the causes of the desire to repeat that informed the cynical production of self in the Sunray context is beyond the scope of this paper. But at least its recognition gives some explanation for how the perpetual reinvention of self achieved a certain steadiness over the time that this research was conducted.

Conclusion

This paper has not set out to dismiss or jettison the metaphors of defence and distancing but indicate how their shortcomings can be addressed with the image of production. Hopefully the brief Sunray example has provided some initial pointers regarding the applicability of this metaphor. In developing the metaphor of production, three conceptual assumptions are necessary. First, resistant identities are not thought of as something *a priori* to workplace politics but co-extensive with it. Second, the subject of resistance and cultural domination are not separated into two domains because they interpenetrate in complex ways. And third, the production process is not a complete existential

reinvention, but always contextually bound by class, capitalism, nation, gender and so-forth.

The paper hopefully extends our understandings of the complex ways in which self, resistance and power intersect in the context of contemporary work forms. In particular, emphasis has been placed on the epistemological importance of metaphor for visualizing political activity. Given that the politics of work has not received a great deal of attention in studies of organization and metaphor, the paper provides an example of what this might look like. And finally, future research could further explore how the micro-processes discussed above connect with broader societal forces. An over-emphasis on banal acts of resistance runs the risk of missing the collective struggles that contextualize everyday life. Indeed, the conceptual absence of class in recent critical scholarship is particularly striking given the huge wealth disparities that now characterize under-developed and over-developed economies. The metaphor of production might prove useful here too as activism attempts to create fragile 'spaces of hope' (Harvey, 2000) within ever widening flows of domination.

Notes

1. While organizational cynicism has been extensively discussed in the mainstream and prescriptive management scholarship (e.g., Kanter and Mirvis, 1989; Anderson, 1996; Anderson and Bateman, 1997; Reichers et al., 1997; Dean et al., 1998; Wanos et al., 2000), this article focuses on its treatment in *critical* management studies.

2. In her discussion of the emotional labour process among airline workers Hochschild (1983) draws on Berman (1970) and Trilling (1972) to theorize authenticity (or what she calls our 'inner jewel') as a base reserve of individuality. The concept of authenticity obviously has a rich lineage in social theory and philosophy, with perhaps its most obvious reference among proponents of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory (for example, see Marcuse [1964] and Fromm [1956]). Although an extended analysis of this intellectual history is beyond the scope of this paper, see Adorno's *The Jargon of Authenticity* (1973) for a sustained critique of its philosophical usage.

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